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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses: (1) the main ideas contained in "The Federalist Papers"; (2) reasons for teaching "The Federalist Papers" in secondary schools; and (3) how to teach ideas of "The Federalist Papers." The authors of "The Federalist" held varying ideas about government, but strongly agreed on the fundamental ideas of republicanism, federalism, separation of powers, and free government. Ideas of "The Federalist" are essential elements of education for citizenship in the U.S. constitutional democracy, and they are keys to understanding how U.S. government works. Ideas of "The Federalist Papers" are congruent with the content of standard secondary social studies courses and can be infused into those courses. They can be used to teach core concepts of U.S. constitutional government, and excerpts from selected essays can be utilized to explicate these civic concepts. Ideas of "The Federalist" can be used to encourage deliberation, reflection, and rational decision-making. Teachers can abbreviate, annotate, and otherwise edit selections from the documents to aid comprehension and interpretation of main ideas by students. References and ERIC resources are given. (SM)

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TEACHING THE FEDERALIST PAPERS

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TEACHING *THE FEDERALIST PAPERS*

by John J. Patrick

The Federalist is the great American contribution to literature on constitutional government. Thomas Jefferson proclaimed it "the best commentary on the principles of government which was ever written." In *Cohens v. Virginia* (1821), Chief Justice John Marshall wrote: "It [*The Federalist*] is a complete commentary on our Constitution, and it is appealed to by all parties in the questions to which that instrument gave birth." From the 1790s until today, lawyers, judges, politicians, and scholars have used ideas of *The Federalist* to guide their decisions about constitutional issues.

Ideas of *The Federalist*, at the core of civic culture in the United States, are essential elements of education for citizenship in the American constitutional democracy. This ERIC Digest discusses (1) main ideas of *The Federalist*, (2) reasons for teaching ideas of *The Federalist* in secondary schools, and (3) how to teach ideas of *The Federalist Papers*.

What Are Main Ideas of *The Federalist*? *The Federalist Papers* were written and printed from October 1787 until May 1788 to counter arguments of Antifederalists against ratification of the Constitution of 1787. Alexander Hamilton was the originator of this work and author of fifty-one essays; James Madison wrote twenty-six of the papers; three essays were jointly authored by Hamilton and Madison; and John Jay wrote five of *The Federalist Papers*. However, when these essays appeared in *The Independent Journal* and other New York newspapers, they were attributed to "Publius" (this pseudonym referred to Publius Valerius Publicola, a great defender of the ancient Roman Republic).

The authors of *The Federalist* had varying and sometimes clashing ideas about government, but they agreed strongly on certain fundamental ideas: republicanism, federalism, separation of powers, and free government.

Republicanism. A republican government is one "in which the scheme of representation takes place" (No. 10). It is based on the consent of the governed because power is delegated to a small number of citizens who are elected by the rest of them.

Federalism. In a federal republic, power is divided vertically between a general (federal) government and several state governments. Two levels of government, each supreme in its own sphere, can exercise powers separately and directly on the people. State governments can neither ignore nor contradict federal statutes that conform to the supreme law, the Constitution. This conception of federalism departed from traditional forms, known today as confederations, in which states retained full sovereignty over their internal affairs.

Separation of Powers. "Publius" proclaims (No. 47): "The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands . . . may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny." So the Constitution separates powers of government among three branches according to function. But this horizontal separation of powers is not complete. Each branch has various constitutional means to participate in the affairs of the others to check and balance powers in government and prevent one branch of the government from dominating the others.

Free Government. Republicanism, federalism, and separation of powers are characteristics of free government. According to *The Federalist*, free government is popular government limited by law to protect the security, liberty, and property of individuals. A free government is powerful enough to provide protection against external and internal threats and limited enough to prevent tyranny in any form. In particular, free government is designed to guard against the most insidious danger of government by the people—the tyranny of the many over the few. Of course, it was mainly the "propertied few" that "Publius" had in mind, but this principle applies equally to constitutional protection of religious, ethnic, racial, or other minorities against oppression by the majority.

Why Should You Teach Ideas of *The Federalist Papers*? Ideas of *The Federalist* should be essential elements of civic education, because they are core values and principles of the American heritage and foundations of national unity in a pluralistic society. These ideas are also keys to understanding how American government works.

Recent assessments of the curriculum and of students' knowledge indicate a need to emphasize ideas of *The Federalist* in secondary schools. Secondary school textbooks in history and government tend to avoid detailed examination of political ideas in history and our contemporary society. One analyst writes: "The lack of intellectual history in the texts has had some serious consequences, one of which is that students get a rather profound misunderstanding of the Constitution. . . . Rarely have they [the textbooks] mentioned the political philosophy of the Framers (FitzGerald 1980, 152).

Another deficiency of the textbook-dominated curriculum of secondary schools is neglect of primary sources—the documents that directly communicate to students the ideas and ways of thinking and writing of Americans in other times. In particular, most students have little or no exposure to documents on American political ideas, including the ideas of the Founding Fathers in such fundamental sources as *The Federalist Papers*.

Neglect of political ideas in the curriculum has led to massive public ignorance about the fundamentals of American constitutional government, which was revealed in recent nation-wide studies by the Hearst Corporation and the National Assessment of

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Educational Progress (NAEP). A national sample of 17-year-olds achieved a dismal average score of 54.4% on a 19-item test about the U.S. Constitution. Only 40% of these respondents knew that *The Federalist Papers* were written to support ratification of the Constitution (Ravitch and Finn 1987, 55-58).

There is an obvious need to emphasize ideas of *The Federalist Papers* in the secondary school curriculum. These ideas certainly fit standard educational goals and curriculum guides for courses in history, government, and civics. They also are core components of the American civic heritage and keys to civic literacy. Finally, they have enduring relevance to contemporary citizenship and government. The bicentennial of *The Federalist Papers* in 1988 is a suitable occasion to renew and improve education on core ideas of American constitutional democracy.

How Can You Teach Ideas of *The Federalist Papers*? Ideas of *The Federalist Papers* are congruent with the content of standard secondary school courses, such as American history, government, civics, and studies of Western Civilization in world history. Therefore, there is no need to create special courses or units of study on *The Federalist Papers* because examination of these documents can be infused into standard coursework. How can *The Federalist Papers* be used effectively with secondary school students?

Use *The Federalist Papers* to teach core concepts of American constitutional government, such as republicanism, federalism, separation of powers, judicial review, national security, civil liberties, popular sovereignty, an energetic executive, limited government, the rule of law, free government, and so forth. Excerpts from selected essays can be used to explicate these civic concepts; for example, essays 47-51 are classic discussions of the American conception of separation of powers; essays 78-83 explain and justify novel American ideas on an independent judiciary and judicial review; essays 9, 10, 37, 39, 51 treat the American idea of federalism in an extended republic.

Show how core concepts of *The Federalist* are rooted in Western Civilization by teaching connections of the European Age of Enlightenment to the theory and practice of politics in eighteenth-century America. Compare these ideas and the practices they spawned in the United States with theories and institutions of government around the world in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Through this global comparative analysis, students can learn how American ideas on constitutional government are related to civic cultures of other times and places.

Encourage deliberation, reflection, and rational decision-making about perennial issues of constitutional government that are raised by *The Federalist Papers*. These essays can be used to spark debate on questions that have permeated our constitutional history, such as how to have majority rule with protection of minority rights; how to have a powerful national government that is also strictly limited by law; how to maintain national security while protecting civil liberties, including the freedom of dissenters; and how to balance effective national government with meaningful rights for state governments. Discussions of these issues in *The Federalist* can be assigned in concert with readings about specific instances of these issues in history and current events.

Abbreviate, annotate, and otherwise edit selections from *The Federalist Papers* to aid comprehension and interpretation of main ideas by average secondary school students. If possible, obtain high-quality learning materials on *The Federalist Papers*, which have been prepared for use with high school students. It is unlikely that teachers will find time to include more than a few of *The Federalist Papers* in their courses. The following numbers are recommended as most suitable for use in secondary school courses: 1, 9, 10, 23, 39, 41, 47, 51, 70, 78.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a list of resources, including references used to prepare the Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304 or call 1-800-277-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (*Current Index to Journals in Education*)which is available in libraries containing ERIC collections. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries using the bibliographic information provided below.

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